



She Will Never Be Defeated

by Martin Marprelate

Molly had learned to kill. All it took was a straight push from the shoulder. Her right arm driving, elbow locked, and the heel of her palm just so. If it connected with a jaw it would drive the bone back into the owner's skull and crush his brains. Quick death. She hadn't done it yet. She was 59 and didn't get into a lot of fist fights.

Weariness of fear and a tacit acceptance there would be no more protectors in her life inspired her to learn self-defence. In fact Molly hadn't been punched for 20 years and that man was long gone anyway. Sometimes she thought about him when she practiced at the martial arts class.

She would permit herself a guilty little smile for that later, even if she was the only person who saw it, alone in the hall mirror at home, plucking at strands of her straight Black Cherry hair.

Was that a glint of silver in the roots? Possibly. Molly's eyes narrowed like a cowboy from the Saturday cinema matinees of her childhood. She was scanning the undergrowth for tell-tale glimpses of the worn gunmetal that was her natural colour now. She sighed. The delicate folds of her laughter lines bunched. She saw the crow's feet, sighed again and stopped looking for grey hairs.

"Stop worrying, you don't look old, mum," said Paul, her eldest, as he appeared in the hall pulling on his 'high-vis' jacket and slotting away a final scrap of toast.

"I'm not worried about looking old, I'm worried about looking a state," Molly smiled at him via the mirror. "Are you coming back here tonight?"

"I think I'll stop over at Petra's, try and sort things out. She texted me this morning. Seems to have calmed down..."

"Has she? Good. How's little Elopecia?"

"Ellenycia mum."

"Baby Ellie..."

"She's fine..."

"What are you digging up today? Are you working in town?"

"I'm still up by The Cock Hotel."

"You can come back here if you need a hot lunch but I'm out today so you'll have to make it yourself."

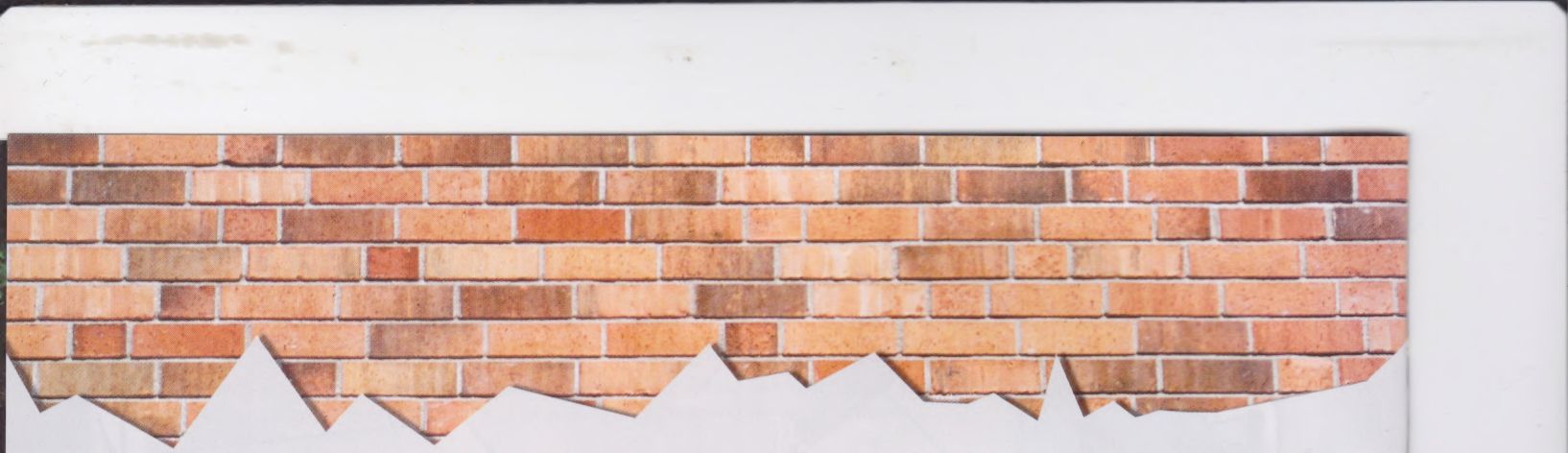
"I'll probably grab a pie from the chippy. Depends who's on the crew. We might work through and finish early for beers."

"Don't turn up at Petra's drunk. That won't help you sort anything out," Molly warned in a tone that suggested the only point in telling him so would be later pointing out she had told him so.

Paul gave her his don't worry wink and Molly wondered whether Paul knew he was just like his father: same gestures, same mistakes. She smiled back and silently accepted his see -you-later kiss on the cheek.

(And then, just as Molly turned to reach for her coat, the bony, unseen claw of an angel swiped at her. The scimitar tip of one talon might have connected but instead ghosted harmlessly through the cotton filled section of the bra where Molly's cancerous bosom once sat.)

Molly felt that lately the winter cold was not only outside her body. When she left the house it embraced her and clung so tightly it sank bone deep. She paused on the step and considered going back in for a heavier coat but then saw her killing arm pulling the door closed. She didn't need the coat, she didn't need its protective weight or its sensible length or its understated green plaid pattern buttoned down over her. The lock clicked into place.



Today was another new thing. A friend of a neighbour had been let down by a volunteer helper at the last minute and Molly had offered her services. Her contact was bell-shaped (Big) Mary from the community centre who would be giving her some training. The (Big) was pronounced cautiously and was only in use because there was often another Mary at the community centre who was considerably smaller and yet not small enough to merit for herself the prefix 'small'.

(Big) Mary worried Molly. She knew her as someone who was always shaking her head in disbelief at the latest catastrophic decision taken by whichever community bureaucracy she happened to be representing at the time. Her dire yet excitable predictions would often tighten up into a bronchial wheeze; a precursor to either a blue-faced coughing fit or a whiplash clearing of the throat. She started conversations with: "I warned them about this" and punctuated them with "They never listen" and ended them with "It'll all end in tears".

So far Molly had never needed to do anything but bashfully agree with (Big) Mary but now she was entering her world. She was going to be an on-street fundraiser: A tin-shaker, a match-maker between good will and good causes. It had seemed like a marvellous thing to say yes to but first there was (?) 'a little chat' with (Big) Mary.

(There had been angels in the street all night, carousing and cursing until a twitch in the curtain transformed them into teenagers with faces in shadow. Molly's car was a big-eared metal beast and it had received their demonstration of rage so well. Dumbly loyal to the spot where it was left as it took its battering, it was waiting to greet her when she came out that day, dented and with a wing mirror hanging off.)

Despairingly Molly looked for hangdog expressions and nervous, guilty glances in her direction. There were a couple of uninterested youngsters down the street but as far as she could tell, the street was free of consciences today. She opened her car's passenger door, popped the glove compartment and took out the masking tape she now kept there permanently because her wing mirrors needed bandaging so often.

At first she replaced them when they were vandalised but it had happened so many times she could no longer afford it – her insurance did not cover such minor damage. Instead she splinted the mirror in place and wrapped the tape round with the tenderness of a marine who leaves no buddies behind.

"This kind of thing shouldn't happen when you are doing charity work" Molly laughed bitterly when she was finally behind the wheel. She knew that if she had been a crying person this is when it would have happened but there were no tears. What she really wanted was to be somewhere else and for today at least she already had a plan for that.

It might even have been the wing mirror that swung it for Molly during her meeting with (Big) Mary. It didn't start well. Molly was late and found Mary alone in the office she had made her own in the community centre huffily moving thick paper filled folders between dog-eared piles.

"How they expect this to get done without a computer is beyond me," Mary said after she had noted Molly's lateness, emphasised how much paperwork she needed to get on with but also pointed out that Molly had to be "vetted". Everyone has to be "vetted" these days.

"On dear, what's that? Had an accident?" (Big) Mary widened her eyes when she finally noticed the wing mirror cradled in Molly's lap.

"Someone thought it would be funny to kick it off my car... again. I taped it up but it fell off in the car park," Molly sighed.

(Big) Mary tutted and shook her head in sympathetic disbelief.

"Mindless. Are you going to be okay to do this today?"

"Oh yes, I'll be fine..."

"Well if you're sure Molly. The last thing I want to do – and I don't mean to be rude – is send a rookie collector out if her mind is not right. It'll all end in tears my love. I've had people who didn't last an hour."

Mary sat back and solemnly folded her arms as best she could. It was more like folding her wrists.

"I'll be fine. I think I can manage more than an hour," Molly assured her, using courtesy to subdue a half-smile but (Big) Mary spotted it because (Big) Mary had been spotting facial expressions like that all her life.

"I'm serious Molly. You'll be out there alone today on a tough pitch for an inexperienced collector. I'll be honest with you, I'm not expecting much. I hate to throw you in at the deep end but we need bodies out there. I told them this would happen if we didn't put money into a recruitment drive. But there's never any money," (Big) Mary paused to grimace at the pity of it all.

"I just want to do something positive so I'm not thinking about things like this all the time," Molly said, lifting her wing mirror.

(Big) Mary gave a slow, knowing nod: "You've certainly got the right attitude my love. Just get on with it. What else can you do? No-one listens to our problems anyway. Right, let's get you kitted out. You're on the retail park."

On their way to the boot of (Big) Mary's car Molly was informed that this was the charity's fourth best performing district in the midlands region, although you had to understand that included Birmingham and who could compete with that? Molly found herself wondering if she had responded "mm" too many times to still sound interested but (Big) Mary's words were flowing now. An eager monologue of collecting hints and anecdotes was spilling out breathlessly as she heaved the boot of her car open to reveal a hoard of sky blue collecting boxes.

"We used to have neck straps but they took them off. Too many people getting neck injuries when people tried to grab the boxes," (Big) Mary said breathlessly as she rooted through the containers shaking them until she found one with some change in. "You want your tin to make some noise. Saves on the voice."

(The un-noticed angels infesting the rooftops around the cathedral just a few streets away were disappointed but not surprised to hear about the introduction of the neck strap safety measure. Some of the more boisterous ones amused each other by pretending to be charity collectors getting dragged about by their necks. One dropped down and wrapped slender substanceless arms around (Big) Mary to slowly hug the breath out of her as she watched Molly depart. Mary slung her plump hand out and caught hold of her car for support. Her vision speckled and for a thrilling moment it was as though cold fingers were weighing her hardworking heart in their palm. But then the angels left to follow Molly releasing (Big) Mary to go and sit down in the warm).

Molly was smiling in the crisp, cloudless sunshine as she took up her position on the pavement outside Boots. She quickly shook her tin at a couple who were thinking about how to get a baby to stop coughing but they marched past without seeing her. Others shuffled by further away. The collecting tin had transformed her into another anonymous item among the featureless concrete street furniture. And as she stood there almost drained of meaning there was a soft gust of cold air as winter disdainfully reminded her the sunshine and empty skies were just for show.

Molly began to rock from foot to foot as her soles numbed. She had one hand in her pocket and the other gripping the tin, her fingers already a raw pink. There would definitely be a frost tonight. She wondered if Paul had his gloves. Hers were in the pockets of her other coat. Her 'granny' coat. There was a plastic ridge on the side of the collecting box that dug into her hand when she shook it. Molly thought this would be better if there was someone to talk to.

For comfort the tin had been swapped between her left hand and then back to her killing arm before Molly had her first coin dropped in. An elderly woman in thick glasses stopped, making quiet hooting noises as the sunlight dazzled her.

"Better give you something I'm seeing angels all round you," she giggled at Molly as she tipped coins out of her knitted blue gloves.

"Thank you," Molly smiled but suddenly felt how deeply the cold had sunk in already. It wasn't even the afternoon yet. How long could she do this for? She was ankle deep in heavy, muscle tightening cold and realising that her pumps, although comfortable, had done nothing to insulate her against the dead chill of the paving she was standing on. She hadn't thought about lunch either. Was she allowed to break for lunch? It would probably be better to carry on without lunch and go early.

A babe in arms pointed at Molly as she rattled her collecting box without realising it, thinking of warming up on her sofa at home. Dad brought the baby over to drop in a coin and Molly was startled back to attention.

"Clever girl," she said as the cupid twisted and writhed towards the box.

"No you can't have that darling," dad said, pulling her back as the baby caught hold of the plastic rim and looked at Molly.

(Out of town where the motorists go, in the narrow space between buying and driving, the eyes of an angel were staring into Molly's. It was a challenge and a demand for sacrifice, it was a test. It was a glimpse of a force from deep within the mechanics of the universe that would digest Molly's goodness as fast as she could produce it. This was the game of being good and the angels all around Molly knew she played it well. She had slipped through their fingers so many times, overcome so much and here she was again, asking the angels for more. They would bring her coins all day if it meant seeing her fail like any other human being. They knelt at her feet eagerly, massaging the cold into her with their thumbs and fingertips, asking her trained flesh to imagine how it would be to be as light as stone and as hard as light).

"What pretty blue eyes," Molly chuckled as the protesting infant was scooped back out of trouble. Dad smiled as he drifted away and time passed unbroken by anything other than the flow of faces in other directions. Molly noticed she was shivering. Angels running their fingers up and down her spine. The cold was in her lungs now, moving through her like smoke. It was tempting to relax into it, to accept it, to let her lids close to stop the stinging of the chill. Her head swam behind a slow blink.

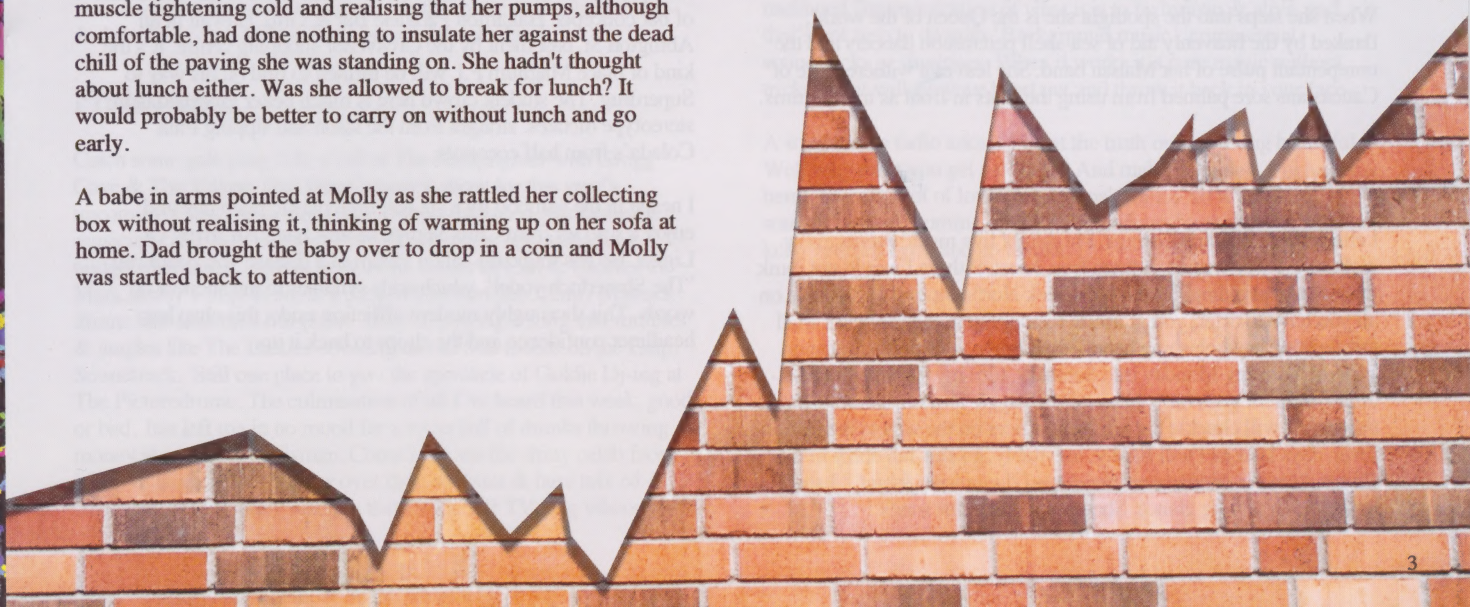
(Only the angels knew how close Molly came to a fall that day, or what the consequences would have been. She had started to sway. They wanted her for their own).

A familiar voice broke the spell. (Big) Mary was there, asking if she was all right. Molly's killing arm extended the tin and she heard herself apologising, saying she was miles away.

"Go home, you're freezing, you've done enough Molly, don't be a hero," she was told.

"Perhaps you're right," she replied softly but it was too late. She already was a hero. There was now a fact about humanity that only the angels knew: At least one member of it was prepared to risk their life to raise £1.87 for a sick child.

(The angels stood aside for her in sporting admiration as Molly returned to her car. They heralded her with trumpets on the journey home but Molly, too humble to recognise her own glory, had put the radio on to wake herself up and mistook the sound for the music of the band Pendulum).





slipstream



Three seeds of Paris

Saturday for Seven Days (and Eight Nights)

by Gary Ingham

Sunday 21st

I am sat in the Demgate Theatre and I don't know why. To sit in a crowd of strangers on a cushioned seat staring ahead feels like a strange thing to do. You give your money and time, clutching an overpriced lager in a plastic cup. Now you sit & wait, for what? A model for good living? A psychic makeover? An erection?

Seven days before a Dodgem deadline and I've got nothing. Do I even like music? What the hell is popular music now anyway? Who cares that Cheryl Cole can't sing? You can barely even call her a pop star; she's a mannequin in the shop front of a sausage factory outlet. I am handed a programme as smoke and Africans fill the stage. I stop thinking and begin to feel again.

West Africa's Orchestre Poly-Rythmo is an octet fresh from 40 years of mastering Voodoo funk and fine silk cowboy shirt tailoring. Their death mocking rhythm cuts no slack on this half capacity Sunday evening hall spotted with awkward pasty-faced sprout belchers. The empty seats are an irrelevance to these boys. They are here to bring the message of life to us poor lost souls. Some knobbly knees can be seen moving above tapping feet. We move to unattended, better seats. Where the hell are all the people? What's on TV that can make you feel as good as this?

Oumou Sangare is the final act,, and she has powers to change everything. This Lady's voice comes prepared to devour galaxies. When she steps into the spotlight she is the Queen of the world, flanked by the heavenly aid of sea-shell percussion dancers and the unrepentant pulse of her Malian band. She leaves a withered pile of Caucasians sore palmed from using the seats in front as tribal drums.

Monday 22nd

I check the local paper listings. I highlight live music events every night of the week, most of them free. Most of them I would not think twice about avoiding, but not this week Northampton! I shall take on all you have to offer, you glorious cosmopolitan metropolis! I shall guzzle your unwholesome beer! I shall brave your public transport system! Turn my Monday into Saturday, turn my Tuesday into Saturday, turn...it goes on... "You must struggle to write about music in this town" will chuckle the arresting officer on the way to the station seven days later as I will finally, inevitably, go shit-fan crazy in the Co-op. "On the contrary my dead-eyed fluorescent friend," I shall retort with a pitying glance. Shoe-town, show me magic!

"Rushden Musical Appreciation Society Ab-Lib Singers at The Quakers House" is one intriguingly tempting title for a soggy evenings puddle stomp into town. I'm on Wellington St. ten minutes early and the doors are already locked. Pressing my face to the glass as the security lights flash in the car park raises not one eye-lid from the gaggle of cagouled grey-hairs at the back of the hall. The ad-lib singers prove a little over zealous in their choice of title, looking & sounding much more like a teen-choir of matching snot-green jumpers singing a sternly conducted 'Walking In The Air'.

Disappointment fades to relief as I note those same locked doors could have been keeping me inside rather than out. I make fleet of foot to an open mic night. You can find such events any night of the week with varying results. They often have unidentifiable yet distinct qualities, like the smell of other peoples houses. Luckily, within the bosomy cosiness of The Lamplighter on Overstone Rd., I've picked a doozy. I settle into a warm leatherette and enjoy the communal jollity until breaking point comes with some croaky take on 'Build Me Up Buttercup', but there was fun to be had while it lasted.

Tuesday 23rd

This bracing midwinter won't stop me, Northampton. Icy boots clump down to the 'Be Our Guest' acoustic night at the unlikelyst of bar concepts: Hakamou Paradise Bar & Grill. Hawaii in an Abington St. basement by the Grosvenor shopping centre. It's the kind of place Magnum P.I. will be thrilled to find on his way to Superdrug. The student crowd here is much better groomed than stereotype dictates: straight from the salon and sipping Pina Colada's from half coconuts.

I nestle in the bamboo by a six feet high plastic palm tree and enjoy a solo set from Chris Serbyn of new band An Army Of Lights. He has tragically fallen victim of a disease you could call 'The Shoreditch yodel', which adds syllables to the shortest of words. This thoroughly modern affliction aside, this chap has headliner confidence and the chops to back it up.



THE QUAKERS HOUSE

Wednesday 24th

'Chris Parker's Jazz Quartet' at The Headlands Pub's weekly Jazz gathering. Is this where old rockers are put out to pasture? Mr. Parker (formerly of local 60's Beat group The Mantas) & friends swing through Bossa Nova & Django Reinhardt in the heavy aroma of a deep fat fryer (though no-one seems to be eating). A raffle for wine & chocolates takes place to pay the band, I buy a strip, no dice. Four large tables filled with pensionable couples watch on as Chris sings 'It Had To Be You'. Veiny hands intertwine. I may just cry.

I walk for a bus and can hear 'Tequila' all the way to the No.7 to town for a set from Sheffield 6-piece pop outfit Screaming Maldini at The Labour Club. The show was advertised as £3 in the upstairs room, but numbers have swelled the show downstairs and free. They have five singers and a trumpet, and like that's not enough, the songs are sugar rush sweet too. Will the Labour Club save us all?

Thursday 25th

Flop foot the flagstones a mile in the rain to The Rover on Weedon Road. One of those peculiar fringe pubs where the gents have dispensers of 'Zeus' Pills & cock rings. Any evening here would have a couple of company branded construction workers avoiding the wife & swearing loudly at the bar, but tonight more than most. These buggers don't give two shits for poor Tony Haven, Devon's foremost Lap Acoustic tapper. The quiz machine has been unplugged and pushed aside to make way for Tony, a man with hands that scuttle about the frets as if two amphetamine-filled land crabs. He plays a version of Michael Jackson's 'Beat it' so complex Stephen Hawking could write a book about it. His astounding instrumental talents rest as uneasily in this place as re-planted Joshua Trees on a Milton Keynes roundabout island.

Friday 26th

Catch some galloping folk n'roll at The Lamplighter with Gregg Cave & The Village Hall Band's launch show for this year's upcoming Twin fest, a series of gig swaps between Northampton musicians and their European twin-town peers organised on a budget of buttons... Must dash to the corner of Earl & Charles to Mark Refoy's Slipstream at a packed Labour Club. Jonny Mattock drums like a cat on a hot-plate. They're playing a song that rumbles & jangles like The Beatles covering an old Sun record on the Help! Soundtrack. Still one place to go - the spectacle of Goldie Dj-ing at The Picturedrome. The culmination of all I've heard this week, good or bad, has left me in no mood for a room full of drunks throwing money at a celebrity talisman. Come look see the shiny celeb face! 15 bits a gander! He changes over the odd drum & bass mix cd & stands on stage looking just like that Goldie off TV. Big whoop.



TONY HAVEN

Saturday 27th

By the time it was actually Saturday I was almost certainly in the same state as the average 94-year-old man and fell asleep in the afternoon. I roused myself to catch the second half of Northampton Symphony Orchestra's monthly concert at The Spinney Hill Theatre just in time for complimentary cheese & wine. I never understood what the conductor is actually doing that is helpful at these things, he appears to be cleaning the inside of his invisible cage. The rawness of the music causes a physical & emotional riptide. Without a backbeat to hold me down, I doze off. I awake with a jolt of bassoon and two people are staring at me all frowny browed. Tchaikovsky's Symphony No.1 works me over psychologically. I barely know who I am, or any other crucial personal information, other than I must return here someday.

Sunday 28th

And finally, The Roadmender, otherwise known as the only music venue in town to people who don't go to such things. Some good old fashioned Indie nonchalance from a barely existent audience for a triple bill of My First Tooth/ Three Seeds Of Paris/Ex-Lovers in the pleasingly old-school 'Underground'. This is everything my 13 year old self fell in love with gigs for, a dark room with no windows where strange people go to do & say strange things. Is it just total lack of promotion that has kept folks at home? I hope so. With modern entertainment offering not much more than competitive cookery & stale retrospection tangled up in 728 channels of mild mannered masturbation, going out to hear live music can be a simple, undiluted communication of what it is to be human & alive, and that's got zero to do with 'Background music', commercial soundtracks or ringtones. When it works it's pure magic without tricks and it will rip your heart out and throw it back in your face.

A song on the radio asks if I want the truth or something beautiful. Well why can't you get me both? And make it snappy, I'm hungry here! There's a lot of love out there palominos, so if you hear something good coming out of an open door, for your own, sake keep yourself open and go inside.

Politicians.....

as edgy as patients in a dentist's waiting room.

By Norman Adams

The UK General Election will at least have many people talking politics for a couple of months.

It has been a funny old year or two. We have had members of parliament found with their pork pie being paid for by Joe Public, flipping houses, producing bills for moat cleaning and duck islands all at the cost to the tax payer

Out of the recent political financial misdemeanours saga rise a number of the disgruntled electorate, who are now standing as Independents. But what does being an independent mean? Is it a term concocted to enable the voter to easily identify an individual who has the financial means (about £2,500 of disposable income) to be eligible to stand for election? One might argue that this is a grossly oversimplified and inaccurate insight, demonstrating a layperson's understanding of politics. However, my argument is as follows - If you haven't got the cash, you aren't getting into the House of Commons. So for those who are frustrated with the current choice of Labour, Conservative or Liberal Democrat, all of which are promising to cut public services, trying to outdo each other with macho talk of how tough they are going to be, all peddling the same line that there is no alternative - please continue to read on as there may be light at the end of the tunnel for the cash strapped common man/woman.

I have spent some time dwelling on this matter, questioning whether I should sit around grumbling or just accept things are tough and that's life. I soon concluded that yes, there is an alternative - and no, the option is not waiting for a person of independent means to appear who will have the interests of me, my family, people who live on my estate, or any number of estates like it across Northampton at heart.

Collectively you can raise finances to not only run for election, but also to put together a platform to continue beyond it; to spell out your long term agenda. We demonstrated this with the Northampton Save Our Public Services body. Registered in 2009 with the Electoral Commission as a political party to stand in local elections, we depend on a number of small donations to cover the cost, and a number of volunteers to go out into the communities we represent.

As I write this, the list of candidates is seven strong for the constituency we are standing for, and like a lot of others it is growing by the week. This means a number of candidates will be losing the £500 deposit when the votes are counted - all those failing to get 5% of the vote will be in that position.

Running in Northampton South are the Conservatives, UKIP, Independent, Greens, Labour, Liberal Democrat, and coming up on the rails 'Save Our Public Services'. Things will be quite interesting over the next few weeks and up to the day of the election (which is currently predicted to be 6th May) - but whatever you do, don't write us off as a wasted vote. Our candidate in the county council elections surprised many - in a four horse race, they came a very close second overall.

SAVE OUR SERVICES	40%
CONSERVATIVES	41%
LABOUR	15%
LIB DEMS	4%

We will not be playing this election - we need our £500 deposit back, and we will be going flat out - we're in it to win it!

We in 'Save Our Public Services' believe we must campaign to stop these backward policies and contest local and general elections. It is clear that as a collective, and with the involvement of our supporters, we have made a difference in slowing down and stopping some cuts in local services. And it is clear that the next few years the attack on services will intensify.

If you vote for us it's not wasted. Our catch phrase sends a powerful message to these time-serving politicians. It strengthens our voice in the chambers of authority and backs up the campaigns we have to wage in order to defend living standards and local services. Our message that present economic and political policies have failed - is getting across. We don't believe, and neither do the communities we represent, that public is bad and private is good - nor that bankers should be handed hundreds of billions of pounds while services for the majority are cut and privatised. Nationally we've a government that favours banks, big business, and the wealthy. Locally we have Liberal Democrats, Tories and Labour competing to make the cuts that are necessary to fund this obscene wealth redistribution.

As one person put it: If we don't stand we would leave people the Hobson's choice of voting for cuts, cuts or cuts. **"It's like choosing the best person to be mugged by; they'll all do a good job, Labour will give you a good kicking on top while the Tories will stamp on your head for good measure (Lib Dems will do either or both depending on the weather)."**

Holding back the BNP

Holding back the vote of the BNP needs the politicians to address their abandonment of the working class. It is too easy to blame the rise of the BNP on the press. The main cause is government failure to deal with some of the genuine grievances of those who feel left behind and ignored.

As our manufacturing is closed or moved overseas, the skilled working class in places such as Northampton has found their jobs in engineering and alike in decline. Generations observe their children still at home in their thirties as housing prices have risen out of reach. Waiting lists for council housing are growing by the day and many communities feel like they are in terminal decline, faced with a political system that is only listening to a small section of fringe voters in the marginal seats that can swing an election. It should come as no surprise that many voters feel they have nowhere to turn to in the mainstream political system.

Politicians have avoided for the last two decades [if not longer] the concerns of most working class voters. If you were trained to be a technician, you are not going to be fulfilled by a job in a call centre or McDonald's.

It could be argued that some of Britain's working class voters that support the BNP aren't so much racist - and the real divide is not between whites and ethnic minorities, but has more to do with the problems arising from social and economic frustrations. It may have more to do with the shortage of the right type of employment and the shortage of housing to rent at a reasonable cost.

What matters and needs to be closed is the gap between those who have gained from globalization, and the ones who have been falling behind - after many years of a Labour government, the gap is wider than ever and the fault for that lies solely with our politicians.

It seems that voters will be dissatisfied whatever the election result. A poll conducted for the BBC Daily Politics show suggests the nation will be gloomy about any electoral outcome. The recent poll indicates that 36% of voters don't know what the Tories stand for. It also suggests that every conceivable outcome of the election will add to the nation's gloom. The poll asked whether a particular result would make people feel happy or unhappy - and every option resulted in the "unhappies" winning. This may help to explain why, despite the unpopularity of Labour, the Tories aren't doing better than they are. It seems voters aren't particularly enthusiastic about any of the options on offer.



'Save Our Public Services' will be standing to fill that vacuum. Now is a time when voters maybe willing to look to alternative parties aside from the three most established runners. I personally believe we need to try and articulate just what exactly has got up our nose and what we expect of our politicians. We have had this debate in Northampton and I believe that the following quote from one of our supporters; as part of the debate regarding 'The pros and cons of taking part in the election' highlights our common goals succinctly.

"We think that there is a general acceptance that any candidate would not have a massive impact on the vote in this coming election, but would rather act as a rallying call (and we need one) for everyone tired of the Labour/Tory/Lib Dem excuse for political choice".

The argument that we'll be 'diluting the anti-Tory vote' or for that matter the 'Independent' one is one that is consistently raised at every election, and will no doubt be raised at every subsequent election. Though I can understand the view that Labour/Lib Democrats are preferential to the Tories, I just don't think the argument to vote for a slightly lesser evil is in any way progressive, especially as voting for Labour could be seen as having a bad habit you find difficult to quit.

Personally I've had enough of the Labour Party, and the others for that matter, and I am growing tired of arguing with people about the BNP and why they shouldn't support them or vote for them, and then being hit with the question, and a good one at that: 'Well, who should we vote for? Who else is there?' Of course, there is more to political activity than elections, but it is the time that people most actively engage in political discussion. And people in 'warehouse land' where many Northampton people work do feel completely abandoned, or are so disengaged with politics that they genuinely don't care because they feel nothing will ever change.

Standing a candidate will be part of a longer process, but one that needs to happen. And let's stop pissing around with worries about 'diluting the anti-Tory vote'."

That's it for this issue - don't get to bogged down on a coming election day, we need to be fighting each and every day, as we try to keep the services most of us need or will need at some stage in our life.

FLOWERS IN THE RUBBLE

Concluding a trio of articles on much-abused former hood Spring Boroughs, Alan Moore casts his one functioning eye over the area's genuine bright spots and its endangered prospects for regeneration.

Up until the 1960s, Rose Bay Willow Herb had colonised the Boroughs' many wastelands, a drooping silvery-pink beauty thriving in the thick soot from the railway just as it had prospered amidst London's blackened bombsites following the war; practically the grubby neighbourhood's heraldic flower. Flourishing in dirt and failing to survive a national clean-up, you don't see it anymore.

In 2004 with the district in the top 2% of England's deprivation pop-chart some 3.2 million pounds was allocated by the government, on top of (supposedly) already existing social services, in order to at least make life endurable. Thus funded, the ingenious and resourceful support outfit CASPAR moved into their current premises at St. Luke's House, formerly residence of Dodgem Logic's own illustrious Norman Adams, where across the next three years they targeted those parts of the community that were most desperately in need, which is to say pretty much all of them: the area's amongst the country's most deprived in terms of income, education, health, employment, while having one of the highest crime rates. Residents on benefits exceed the national average by twenty, twenty-five percent, or roughly ten percent if you're discussing benefits for incapacity. If you're discussing life expectancy, however, then as we remarked last issue Boroughs residents get ten years less of it than everybody else.

CASPAR, with limited resources, visibly transformed this underdog environment, establishing free workshop courses tackling literacy, numeracy, English as a second language and computer skills. The grants they made available meant different local groups could finally afford equipment, with a music studio supported, paths and walkways both improved, a multi-purpose games area instigated and kids' play equipment for Victoria Park and Millers' (previously Paddy's) Meadow purchased. CASPAR funded well-attended youth activities and summer programs and made massive headway with the Boroughs' widespread drug and prostitution problems. Gardening and allotment projects were commenced, local recycling points were introduced and the security doors at all of the flats' main entrances were paid for.

In fact, the group's grass-roots operation worked such wonders for the Boroughs that the Borough Council, a supposed partner in the project, seemed to come to the conclusion that the place's ordinary social services...which CASPAR was originally only hired to supplement...were no longer as necessary as they had been, leading to the decline in assistance for the district that we've catalogued in previous instalments. Although individual professionals from the various groups that CASPAR works with (which include the Primary Care Trust, the Police and others in addition to the County and the Borough Councils) have been hugely helpful, it appears the councils' attitude has been that if a supplementary body was coping so well in the downtrodden neighbourhood, then they no longer felt the inclination to do anything at all. And now, with CASPAR's funding coming to an end in August, there are serious fears that this indifference will continue, letting all the vital projects that the outfit organised fall into disrepair, abandoning the residents with absolutely no one watching out for them, leaving their ten-years-shorter living standards to sink even further than they did when the original incinerator chimney, the Destructor, was still dominating the smoke-damaged skyline.

Take the CASPAR-aided, much-needed green space and garden area shared by St. Luke's, John's, Mark's and Barnabas's Houses for example, currently fenced off from all the tenants that it was intended for; a plot of grass locked up, incarcerated behind bars and therefore rendered pointless except as a visual reinforcement of the district's last-stop-before-prison atmosphere, suggesting that council concern for the community is less than overwhelming. Then there in the matter of the seventy or eighty million government-allotted pounds intended for improvements in the town, all of it channelled into Thorplands or the Eastern District with Northampton's most deprived, not to say punished neighbourhood receiving nothing. You could almost be forgiven for supposing that council authorities had other plans for my old manor; plans without a place for Boroughs people in them.

After all, the recent narrowing of Marefair doesn't make a lot of sense without, say, some huge redevelopment of Castle Station and its surrounding area, perhaps as part of the purely cosmetic 'cultural mile' intended to lure a largely imaginary tourist trade into the town, presumably to marvel at our horrifying and arse-backwards bus station, our closed-down Zavvi's or our crappy sub-Orwellian talking surveillance cameras in town centre. Is this why the council still sticks people in a condemned firetrap like St. Katherine's Court without bothering to bring it up to legal standards of accommodation, secure in the knowledge that it may be razed to make space for a boot-and-shoe-themed fifth-rate Disneyland? Are the Boroughs' remarkable inhabitants, including all those many troublesome and vocal types who speak out for the rights of their long-suffering community, just messing up some under-qualified town planner's demi-idea for a town that's soulless enough to compete with Milton Keynes?

The people of this ancient neighbourhood, that somehow blossom out of grime to become vital and committed individuals who can illuminate the run-down streets around them, are a breed of flower that must not be allowed to vanish in the wake of a commercially-dictated "clean-up"; must not be allowed to reach a state where you don't see it anymore. And wherever you're reading this, the chances are there's somewhere like the Boroughs only a few blocks away.

Look after what you have.